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(S. Baciocchi, F. Théron, eds.)

New Books

The Scotsman (Edinburgh, 28 octobre 1915)

Anon.

S. Baciocchi and F. Théron (ed.)



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EDITOR'S NOTE

Source primaire :

Anon., « New Books - The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life. A Study in Religious Sociology. By Emile Durkheim, Professor at the University of Paris. Translated from the French by Joseph Ward Swain, M.A. 15s. net London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd. », *The Scotsman* (Edinburgh), October 28, 1915, p. 2

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- 1 M. Émile Durkheim is well known as a distinguished representative of an influential school in France, which regards religion as essentially the product of social causes, and for which, accordingly, the study of religious phenomena is an important branch of the science of sociology. In this massive volume of 450 pages M. Durkheim presents an elaborate study of the religious beliefs and practices of the Australian aborigines or "primitives" as "the most primitive and simple religion which is actually known."^[1] His work differ, however, from those of Spencer and Gillen, on whose researches and those of other recent investigators it is avowedly based, in respect that these primitive ideas and rites are not studied for their own sakes, so to say, but rather as illustrations of the beginnings of those more profound beliefs and more elaborate rites that characterise societies and religions in a more advanced stage of development. It is this wider outlook, together with the severely scientific and objective method of presentation, which gives M. Durkheim's work its special value for the comparative study of religion. The material is arranged in three books, the contents of which are sufficiently indicated by their titles, "Preliminary Question,"^[2] "The Elementary Beliefs,"^[3] and "The Principal Ritual Attitudes."^[4] The most important topic under the first of these heads is the perennial problem of

the definition of religion. "A religion," as here defined, "is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things... beliefs and practice which unite into one single moral community, called a church, all those who adhere to them."^[5] Now, while it is advisable to "make it clear that religion should be an eminently collective thing,"⁶ it is questionable if this is best done by introducing the term 'church,' which only by a doubtful stretch of meaning can be extended to the groups of Australian "primitives." The greater part of the second book is devoted to an exhaustive study of the nature and origin of "totemic beliefs," in the course of which the totem theories of Frazer, Andrew Lang, and other writers are subjected to a drastic criticism. The most suggestive pages of the third book, which is devoted to ritual, are those in which M. Durkheim expounds the nature and significance of the Intichiuma ceremony as practised annually by the tribes of Central Australia^[7]. In this ceremony the author recognises the beginnings of the ritual of sacrifice. While agreeing with Robertson Smith that the original idea of sacrifice is communion with the Deity, M. Durkheim calls attention to several points where that scholar's epochmaking theory of sacrifice requires to be revised. The book is without question indispensable for all serious students of religious phenomena.

NOTES

1. [« Introduction », Durkheim 1915, p. 1]
2. [« Preliminary Question », Durkheim 1915, Book 1, p. 21-97]
3. [« The Elementary Beliefs », Durkheim 1915, Book 2, p. 99-296]
4. [« The Principal Ritual Attitudes », Durkheim 1915, Book 3, p. 297-515]
5. [Orig.] "Thus we arrive at the following definition: *A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden - beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those adhere to them*". Cf. « Definition of Religious Phenomena and of Religion », Durkheim 1915, Book I, Chap. 1., p. 47.
6. [Durkheim 1915, Book I, Chap. 1. « Definition of Religious Phenomena and of Religion », p. 47]
7. [« The Positive Cult. 1. The Elements of Sacrifice », Durkheim 1915, Book 3, chap. 2, p. 326-350]